

# Contemporary fantasies in the State of the art

THE purpose of a press release is to provide information about an exhibition, an artist's work or an important event in a concise form. But sometimes, particularly if they come from a public relations firm or government department, press releases go overboard with extravagant claims that occasionally border on fantasy.

I always take notice of them because they are a good indication of how some people think art should be sold to the public. Each new year brings changes and changes need communication. This year is no exception.

For instance, in a recent message from Welbeck Public Relations is the news that "Melbourne will soon have an art gallery of international standard in the heart of the city" when United Artists re-opens at its new Flinders St address. The position of the gallery in the city, I'm told, will "lend weight to the revitalisation of the 'Paris' end of Melbourne", as United Artists is "next door to The Herald and Weekly Times, opposite Collins Towers, just up the road from the Hyatt and a stone's throw away from the trendy Rosati Restaurant".

And if that isn't enough, in another communication we are all invited to join "the fun and festivities" of "people's day" at the National Gallery of Victoria on February 21. The celebrations at "Australia's first gallery" will mark the opening of the new Murdoch Court, which has been converted into a much needed gallery of contemporary art, and the big survey, *Australian Art 1880-1978: Field to Figuration*. But wasn't *The Field* in 1987?

Not to be beaten, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) has jumped the gun with the unveiling of its enlarged exhibition space. Oklahoma has its surrey with the fringe on top, but now Melbourne. "Australia's premier State of the arts", can boast a Victorian cottage with a gallery of contemporary art out the back as "a measure of the high level of sophistication and culture of the people of Melbourne".

The new building has been designed by architect Daryl Jackson to fit into the picturesque garden surrounds and its exterior is bland enough to achieve this purpose, even if it is painted with green and white stripes.

To christen its new architectural pride and joy, ACCA is playing host to a touring exhibi-



The Hyperborean and the Speluncan by Imants Tillers.

## ART ROBERT ROONEY

tion of *Paintings for the 32nd Venice Biennale* by the "colourful, imaginative and wryly self-conscious" Sydney artist, Imants Tillers.

In a recent interview, Trevor Winkfield, an English artist and translator of Roussel's *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, recalls how he became a modernist by default. "When I was growing up in Leeds, the only paintings available to me were reproductions, either in books or on postcards. . . . So I grew up believing all paintings were small, glossy and flatly painted. It came as something of a surprise to discover years later that they could be bigger than myself, and the paint sufficiently encrusted to induce cracking."

The childish notions of "wee tot" Winkfield are not unlike those expressed in grown-up Tillers' "re-articulation of reproduced images found in magazines and catalogues". They are the basis of his multi-panel paintings. Australians, including Tillers, are big travellers, but that doesn't stop him from stating that "in Australia the experi-

ence of works of art through mechanical reproduction always precedes their direct experience".

In the early 1970s, conceptual purists (Mel Ramsden, for one) dismissed the work of Awakawa because of the Japanese artist's tendency to dress up ideas in aesthetic clothing. The same criticism was sometimes levelled at Tillers' earlier works, but seems less relevant when applied to his large, conceptually-motivated works of recent years. Once completed - using a rather time-consuming method of transferring source images from artists such as Polke, Cucchi, Kiefer and the late works of de Chirico to a series of small canvas boards - his paintings have two lives. They can be sorted into semi-anonymous piles, like old newspapers awaiting collection, or they can be assembled in galleries as big complex, reorganised pictures.

Despite ACCA's (or Tillers'?) insistence on absurdly subdued lighting, the Venice paintings are still stunning. They are at their best when Tillers achieves, through judicious section, an almost seamless fusion of contemporary painting's most marketable icons and certain obscure remnants of the artist's personal history.